

Sermon 4st November, 2018. All Saints Day. Isaiah 25.6-9; Psalm 146; Revelation 21.1-6A; John 11.32-44.

On this special feast day of All Saints, we are invited into an awareness that in this earthly realm we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses and that we are in fact bound to the saints through our communion with them in holiness, simply because we, with them, have been adopted by God into relationship.

On this day we are also invited to be conscious of the fact that, in every act of worship, we join in with the continual worship of the saints, the cloud of witnesses, who never cease glorifying God. The feast of All Saints is therefore a celebration of oneness or union between those of us living in the world and those who have died to this world and who now live in what our tradition calls, the heavenly realm. Together with the saints we worship as one - as the mystical body of Christ that is in heaven and on earth and we partake in that larger reality which traditional theology calls, the “communion of saints.”

Rowan Williams offers thought provoking insight about the unity between ourselves and the saints. Using a sentence from the letter to the Hebrews which proclaims that *without us the saints will not be made perfect* (Hebrews 11.40), Williams writes: *This means that without us, Francis of Assisi will not be made perfect, without us St John of the Cross will not be made perfect without us Mother Theresa will not be made perfect... They are parts of the Communion of saints, the body of Christ to which we too belong. Our life is bound up with theirs and amazingly and humbly, their life is bound up with ours, they enter into their glory when we come with them.... the most whole of God's children reach that wholeness only in communion with us. We might almost say; Heaven help the saints if they depend on us to get them to their final wholeness. And yet that is the bold and startling doctrine that the bible puts before us as a reminder that no-ones holiness is their property and that the holiness of the Christian life is one given into the lives of others that is where it becomes fully itself*.¹

After I read this passage from Williams, it made me think more about the saints and our relationship with them – the formally canonized ones and the ones who have known and loved and in whom Jesus has come alive. For me it also takes our proclamation “we are the body of Christ” “his spirit is with us” to a deeper level, for as we say it, we are claiming unity with the living and the deceased as the Mystical body of Christ, the *communion of saints*.

The stories of the saints, and they are all different, have one thing in common and that is that their very lives witness to the reality that God in Christ is a believable reality in the present age. Rowan Williams writes about this common feature: *“Witnesses establish the truth by giving evidence, who have made God believable by how they have lived and how they have died. The saints are the people who recognize that arguments will finally not win the day. God does not make himself credible by argument. God does not respond to our doubts, our intellectual querying, our uncertainty, by delivering from Heaven a neatly*

¹ <https://entangledstates.org/2009/11/12/rowan-williams-perfecting-the-saints/>
accessed: 1.11.18.

annotated list of logical propositions with which we cannot disagree. ..God deals with us by our life and a death, by Jesus. And God continues to deal with us by lives and deaths that make him credible, that make Jesus tangible here and now.”²

The gospel narratives are also a witness to this truth, yet scripture is different to the witness of the saints. Scripture provides personal details of evidence of God in Christ and even though there has been much theological critical analysis in more recent times basically determining who said what and when, the message remains the same; in Christ we have a very personal God who loves what he has made and in this love has rendered everything holy.

In today’s scripture readings we hear about God’s power of love in Jesus Christ in the raising of Lazarus who has been dead for four days. We hear about Jesus compassion, his emotion his personal involvement in the scenario before him. This story is evidence of a very personal God who cares and who is involved in our lives.

The reading from Isaiah declares details about the messianic banquet at the end time, and the psalm sings out in praise to our God. The reading from Revelation tells us that the end times are about the new creation, the New Jerusalem after the last judgement. All creation will be renewed freed from imperfections, and transformed by God who lives among us.

The sea, which symbolizes the primeval force of turbulence, unrest and chaos - will be no more. And the holy city will be as a bride adorned for her husband and the bride will be the bride of the lamb. “It is done” the reading tells us. “I am the alpha and the omega the beginning and the end.” Heaven has come to us in Christ.

The feast of All Saints' is therefore an especially personal celebration as we mingle with the Saints in mutual love and benefit and each one of us recalls our loved ones, friends, and mentors who have passed from this life into the next.

May we each on this day be at one with God, each other and our memories, as we rejoice in the God we know in Christ and in His love that permeates all and holds all things together universally and eternally.

The Lord be with you.

² <https://entangledstates.org/2009/11/12/rowan-williams-perfecting-the-saints/>
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